

Where does time come from and how do I see it?

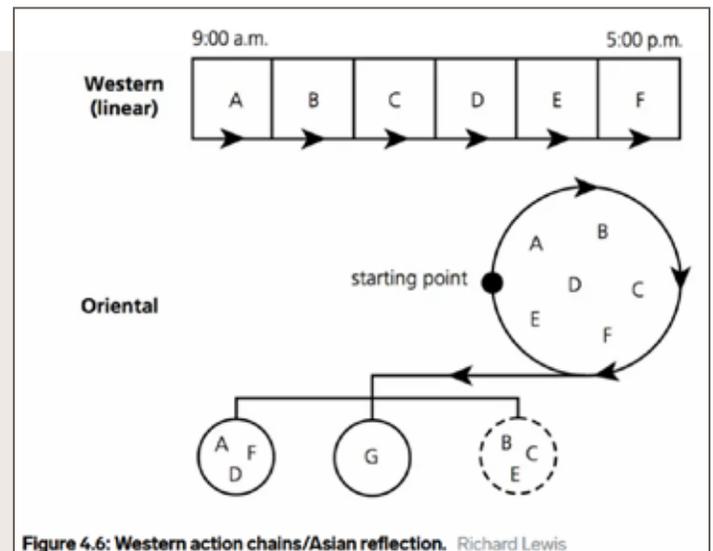
Why do we keep track of time? What even is time? Do people experience time differently? These are large questions that even philosophers and scientists have trouble grappling with.

While quarantined, you are probably experiencing time a lot differently than you used to. Weeks may feel like months and what happened just a couple months ago feels like ages ago!

Cultural perspectives

Thanks to Einstein and his theory of relativity, we know that time is subjective. This means that how an object or a person experiences time depends on location, movement, and a whole bunch of other factors. Culturally, we also know that people around the world experience time in different ways.

Source: "How Different Cultures Understand Time" by Richard Lewis, Business Insider <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-different-cultures-understand-time-2014-5>



Learn about the secret powers of time
WATCH: youtu.be/A3oliH7BLmg



Cultural attitudes to time have also changed throughout history. The fast-paced, work-dominated way of life seen in countries like the United States and Japan are historical anomalies. The pace at which we live our daily lives would be incomprehensible to someone who lived just a couple hundred years ago.

In the 1990s, American psychologist Robert Levine conducted a massive study looking at how different cultures understand time. He did this by traveling around the world and measuring how long it took individuals to perform simple tasks, like walking to the train station or assisting customers at the post office.

Fellow psychologist Philip Zimbardo provides a good summary of these findings and further explores how our own perspectives of time influence the way we behave in and see the world around us.

Talking about time

To understand just how much of our attitudes towards time are shaped by our culture, consider how many commonly used phrases in American English relate time to money. We *save time* or, conversely, we *waste time* that is not *well spent*. In fact, *time itself is money*.



Explore: How the Language You Speak Influences the Way You Think, Psychology Today

READ: psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-peek/201808/how-the-language-you-speak-influences-the-way-you-think



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Can you think of any other phrases in the English language (or other languages!) that use time as a metaphor?



How do we measure time?

How we keep track of time has also changed throughout history. While some time measurements are dictated by natural phenomenon, like the cycle of the moon, the reality is that most units of time are totally arbitrary and made up! The following video from PBS delves into the fascinating history of how we measure time.



Check out: A Brief History of Time(keeping)

WATCH: youtu.be/mjSwRwAqQA4



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When did time begin?

This is a funny question, isn't it? We know when certain events start and end. We know when we began – at birth. But when did the entire universe begin? And where do we fit on the timeline?

A thought-provoking – and humbling – exercise is to consider how the entire span of human history fits into the grand history of the universe.



Check out: The History & Future of Everything

WATCH: youtu.be/5TbUxGZtwGI

Now



Imagining time on a universal scale is hard to do! Given the average human lifespan, it's not surprising that we have trouble comprehending time on the scale of millions (or even billions) of years.

What were some of the most surprising things you learned from the video? How has this changed your perspective on human history?

You, in the present

The current you is a result of all the actions you have taken, as well as the events that have occurred around you. Some of these, like your parents or guardians taking care of you or going to school, have directly shaped the person you are today. Other events, like the ones you hear about on the news or learn about at school, have had an indirect impact by shaping the world you grew up in – and currently live in.

Big questions:

1. Why do different cultures understand and experience time differently?
2. What are your own cultural attitudes towards time?
3. How do you experience time? And what factors influence this?
4. How have understandings of time changed throughout the course of history?
5. Where are you in the timeline of history?

Activity: Personal Timeline

In this activity, you will create a timeline of you! At a minimum, your timeline should feature all of the major events in your own life, starting with your birth. As an extension, you can also include important historical events that have occurred in your own lifetime.

Process

1. Write down the most important events of your life so far and try to come up with specific dates when these occurred. You will probably want to sit down with your parents, guardian, or other family member to complete this step.
2. Add smaller events that are especially meaningful to you. An example might be when you learned a new skill, met your best friend, overcame a fear, or did something for the first time.
3. Fill out your timeline with important national and world events.

You may create your timeline using an online timeline maker or you can make yours with pencil and paper. We have provided some guides and resources below. Get creative!

Resources

- Guide for making a physical timeline: thoughtco.com/timeline-activity-for-kids-4145478
- Guide for making an online timeline: khanacademy.org/partner-content/big-history-project/what-is-big-history/other-materials1/a/activity-my-timeline
- Online timeline makers:
 - Tiki-Toki: tiki-toki.com/
 - TimelineJS: timeline.knightlab.com/
 - Free-Timeline: free-timeline.com/

Further Reading

- Exactly what is time?: exactlywhatistime.com
- “Time and Culture” by Robert V. Levine, Noba Project: nobaproject.com/modules/time-and-culture#content
- “What’s the time? Depends which culture you are from!” by Matthew MacLachlan, Communicaid: communicaid.com/cross-cultural-training/blog/working-effectively-across-cultures-perceptions-of-time/

Students! Answering our questions? Using our strategies? Share them with us at discovery@worldstrides.com.